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Adapting Course Books to Meet the Expectations of the Syllabus and the Students' Local Needs. A Focus on Teacher Practices.

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Abstract

With the rapid English language teaching development, more and more books have made their way into the market and choosing the right course book to meet the expectations of the syllabus and the students' local needs is becoming more and more important at all levels of English language teaching. This paper examined ways of adapting course books by teachers of English language in secondary school in Kenya, so as to meet the expectations of the syllabus and the students' needs. With effort from text book writers, English language teaching researchers and classroom teachers, course book adaption has evolved from ad hoc to systematic action. Although most classroom teachers may not be involved in the production of the syllabus and the text books, they have the responsibility for course book adaptation. Reference to the term course book has expanded from books to all materials used in English language teaching. It has evolved into a great variety of resources used in language classrooms such as audio cassettes, videos, CD-ROMs, flash cards and other authentic materials such as newspapers, photographs, advertisements and radio/TV programmes. The findings of this paper revealed that, for a course book to help a student learn language, it has to be perceived as relevant to the student's needs and provide new learning experiences that connect with the student's previous knowledge. It recommended that, for effective teaching/learning to take place successfully, teachers should play an active role in adapting course books. They should throw away the so called course books in traditional pedagogy and adapt authentic materials in their practices.

Keywords: *Course books, adapt, syllabus, local needs, teacher practices.*

Introduction

Rapid developments in English language teaching have enabled more and more books to make their way into the market. Therefore, choosing the right course books to meet the expectations of the syllabus and the students' local needs is becoming more and more important at all levels of ELT. With these developments, course book adaption has evolved from ad hoc to systematic action. Though most classroom teachers may not be involved in the production of the syllabus and the course

books, they have the responsibility for course book adaption. The term course book is widely used to refer to selected text books used by teachers and learners to facilitate the learning of language. However, reference to this term has evolved from books as referred to in traditional pedagogy into a great variety of resources used in ELT, such as audio cassettes, videos, CD-ROMs, flash cards and other authentic materials such as newspapers, photographs, advertisements and radio/TV programmes.

In this case, the term material is used instead of course books.

To make classroom teaching attractive and captivating to the learners, teachers should strive to vary stimuli by use of a variety of teaching materials. A common introduction in English language classrooms goes, "Morning class. Take out your text books and turn to page ... Read the passage silently and do the exercises that follow." The book referred to by the teacher, is usually the day in day out reference material in that particular classroom. The students may well be comfortable with this approach but after a while, many of them will start to wonder why they have to attend classes when they have no additional knowledge other than their text book. They soon lose interest in the subject and start missing classes, since they see no reason when they could do most of these exercises at home or elsewhere other than a confined classroom environment.

Many teachers have taken to an 'easy do' kind of practice because they do not have time to prepare for their lessons. Lack of motivation and financial support by institutions have been commonly cited as reasons why teachers do not put in their all when it comes to lesson preparation. They stick to one course book prescribed by the school as the class text and do not give a chance to course book adaption.

Adapting Course books

Adapting a course book refers to the choosing of materials and activities that can be useful, meaningful, interesting, motivating and work to suit the students' needs. According to Uddin (2009) just as a piano does not play music, a course book does not teach language. It is only a stimulus or instrument for teaching and learning. Therefore, it should not be

followed to the later. In this case, a teacher's creativity and innovativeness is called for.

Majority of teachers tend to rely on only one textbook for syllabus coverage. However, text books, no matter how good they may be, have been written for the average group of learners and different learners have their own unique learning differences, interests, needs and objectives (Recite 2014). One way to meet the challenge of following a course book to the later so as to respond to the needs of the students is to adapt a negotiated syllabus approach between the teacher and the students. The teacher, should give students some responsibility to decide on how the course books should be used inside and outside the classroom. Recite (2014) identifies ways in which a teacher can encourage students to take control of the course book so as to meet their needs. These points can also be used to guide the teacher in the adaption process so as to meet the needs of the students and the expectations of the syllabus. They include the following:

- The teacher should allow students to participate in choosing their course book (s) after exposing them to a variety before commencement of the course. This can be done by exposing them to a selection in class or doing an online research. They can then share their opinions in small groups and in class before a final decision is made. Individual learners should be allowed to identify their learning needs which can then be used as a guide in adapting course books.
- With reference to the syllabus, students should be allowed to decide which topics they want to study and in what order especially during revision.

- Many activities and examples given in text books are not culturally relevant to the learners since they are drawn from foreign environments. A teacher should therefore, elicit activities and examples which are relevant to the students' lives. The teacher should also encourage students to create their own.

Ways of Adapting Course Books

Course books are a basic requirement in the teaching/learning process. However, Teachers should use them creatively by bringing in their own personality and teaching style. They should not follow the script of a course book inflexibly. According to Edge and Wharton (1998), they should add where coverage is not adequate, include topics that are of interest to the students, delete where it is irrelevant and change or reshape content that is not engaging enough in response to the needs of the students and the syllabus.

In agreement with Edge and Wharton (1998), an article from Chulalongkorn University (2013) states that teachers should be able to Change materials so that the language level corresponds to that of the learners, fill in gaps that reveal insufficient coverage, and have opportunities that allow learners to make decisions about their learning. If the coverage of a particular topic is not adequate, then the teacher can do quantitative addition which is extending the content by adding more exercises or qualitative addition which is expanding the content by adding other topics.

To make classroom teaching /learning a success, teachers should modify and simplify the content. It is possible that the linguistic content in the textbook is adequate, but its presentation is not. In this

case, teachers have two choices. They can either rewrite the content to make a unit in the book more interesting by use of real-life examples rather than those provided in the text or restructure it in a different way from how it is presented. For example, the teacher may decide to change the inductive approach to a new grammar point to a deductive one.

Teachers can delete or re-order course book content. For deletion, exercises or activities that do not suit students' needs are removed. It is possible to delete one part of the textbook and add another that covers the same language content. Re-ordering on the other hand means moving content to an earlier or later date so as to allow continuity. For example, a teacher can decide to move one unit of the book to a later date to be used as a follow up activity.

According to the Journal of Language Education in Asia (2012), a teacher should think of the following points when adapting a course book for effective language teaching: Localizing the text, personalizing, modernizing, simplifying, re-ordering and reducing the text.

The teacher should consider localizing the course book. This is done by replacing foreign settings and content with local or regional ones that are familiar to the learners. For example, if a passage is about city life, and the learners are from a rural setting, then the teacher should bring it close to the learners by referring to examples from life in the village market before they read the text centered on city life. This activity adequately prepares the learners to receive ideas that are farfetched from them.

The teacher should come up with examples and activities that relate directly to the syllabus and the learners' needs, thus

personalizing the text. Learners should be allowed to use their life experience and learned knowledge to relate to the content being taught in the classroom. For example, the teacher should allow them to explore their own life stories then relate them to the new knowledge.

Teachers should consider making their content modern or current. For example, use of technology which is the current mode of teaching. Teachers should update all the content that is outdated such as the language, the cultural settings, the pictures and examples given that seem out of date.

The teacher should simplify and reorder content to suit the demands of the syllabus and the learners' needs. When simplifying, the teacher should consider the difficulty of the language used in relation to the learner's level. The tasks that seem difficult should be simplified by breaking them down beginning with what the students understand most to the challenging content. The content can also be simplified by reordering it. For example, if the students find the order of adjectives difficult, then the teacher can begin by teaching the types of adjectives.

The teacher can also delete the content and the activities that are not necessary in achieving the set objectives. Some course books may contain topics and activities that are not relevant to the syllabus. As mentioned earlier, a course book may contain a topic that is outdated such as the writing of telegrams. This is an outdated activity replaced by technology such as use of mobile phone short messages and emails which are a faster means of communication. The learners should be given a chance to practice the skill taught. This can be done by use of exercises provided in the course book. If these exercises are few, then the teacher and the learners can come up with other activities that will give the learners more practice on the skill. The more the exercises, the better the mastery of the skill

especially for the content that proves difficult to the learners.

Teacher Practices

Apart from modifying the teaching/learning materials, teachers should also modify their classroom practices. A great deal can be achieved by allowing change in both teacher practices and the materials used. It is not uncommon for materials to be quite adequate in terms of content coverage, but, the teacher's presentation and practice may have short falls. In this case, a teacher's cognition plays a very vital role. It is what a teacher thinks, knows, believes and the relationships of these mental constructs to what the teacher does in the language teaching classroom that makes the teaching/ learning process successful.

Teachers should encourage learner autonomy. Learners should be given a certain degree of choice in their learning. They should be allowed to make some decisions about their own learning. Sticking to one prescribed course book as it is the case in Kenyan secondary schools, limits opportunities to give learners responsibility for their learning since most decisions about what to learn, or when and how, have already been made for them. The course book should be used only as a guide to more creative activities. Learners can decide what to read in terms of comprehension, poems, novels and plays and the kind of exercises to be done in and out of class.

Teachers should know their learners individually and group them according to their needs. Weak students should be offered different activities from those of the bright students though covering the same content. Different ways of interacting with the course book content for both bright and weak students should be devised. For example, weak learners may be asked to

read a text and answer a series of given questions while bright learners are asked to write a critique.

Let whatever the learners like most be brought to the classroom. For example, many young people like to experiment with technology, such as use digital games, mobile phone technologies and social technologies such as blogs, wikis, what's up, face book and twitter. All these can be harnessed to encourage learners to reflect on their classroom work, exchange views and comment on each other's ideas.

The teacher should be creative in terms of students' assessment. They should add their own ideas on what is provided in the course book and also vary their assessment modes other than those provided for in the course books. This may pose a challenge to Kenyan secondary school teachers since course books prepare learners for the KNEC examinations and it may be difficult to avoid practicing the types of questions learners may be asked. However this does not limit the teacher's ability in being creative in terms of students' assessment.

It is worth for teachers of English language to consider using appropriate teaching materials in their language classrooms. According to Psoinos (2012), the world is changing, and the demands placed on individual students are far beyond the mere acquisition of a language. Today's students are not only expected to have a range of knowledge and skills, as well as personal qualities that equip them to compete in the modern job market, but also need an education that will help them be informed. What is needed most in today's society are thinking individuals able to thrive in a global environment of change. Psoinos (2012) further states that the world requires an all round student. For example, a Kenyan student who will not be

embarrassed for not knowing the capital city of Kenya. Teachers as professionals should remember that they are educators as opposed to mere examination proctors. Their role involves the development and personal growth of their students and this can be realized through adaption of course books.

According to Reinders (2012) Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Has gained momentum and constitutes an utterly valuable resource for teaching. Using the web as a resource, teachers can collect up-to-date, authentic material that they can use with groups of learners that share common features.

Benefits of adapting course books

1. The experience is fulfilling, both to the teacher and the student.
2. Helps educators and students to move away from fixed course books and examinations that seem to play so dominant a role that they have stifled our creativity as well as our students' desire to learn.
3. Most course books are not aimed at any specific group of learners. They therefore, do not fit all groups of learners that teachers may encounter. In this case, adapting course books is of great benefit to both the teacher and the learners in that it enables the teacher to take into account the learning environment, the learners needs and to avoid the lack of 'fit' of the course book .
4. Teacher produced materials are normally cheap and therefore, the best option in terms of both school and student budget.
5. Another area in which teacher designed materials are of great benefit is that of individual needs. Teacher designed materials cater for the learners'

heterogeneity inherent in the language classroom. It takes into account the learners' culture, first language, learning needs and experiences.

6. Adapting course books provides the teacher with the opportunity to select books and activities at the right level of learners so as to ensure appropriate challenge and levels of success.
7. Adapted materials add a personal touch to a teachers classroom practices that students appreciate, thus increasing motivation and engagement in learning.
8. A teacher's adapted materials have the element of timeliness. They make it easy for a teacher to seize any teachable moment.
9. According to Block (1991) a teacher's adapted materials help to avoid a 'one- size- fits- all' approach of commercial materials.

Challenges to Course Book Adaption

1. Teachers may not be willing to invest in both time and effort
2. Teachers are expected to meet predefined objectives, teach to the test, and follow a given curriculum. One obvious manifestation of these constraints is the set course book. It prescribes content, sequencing, gradation, activities and assessment, limiting teachers' choices and freedom in the classroom.
3. According to Reinders & Balcikanli (2011) there is very little information on how teachers can adopt course books and indeed on how they can develop this skill. It seems that teachers are expected to develop this ability over time, with experience.

Reinders (2010) suggests that teachers need to understand the constraints on their practice and rather than feel disempowered, they should empower themselves by finding space and opportunity for maneuver.

4. Flooded market of course books puts Pressure on the teacher to conform or to use the latest materials. This limits the teachers' creativity and their ability to make their own choices about what is best for their learners.
5. Both electronic and physical textbooks are expensive.
6. The teachers' creativity in terms of adapting new ways of testing learners may face challenges especially in cases where the course book prepares learners for a required examination or test. It may be difficult to avoid practicing the types of questions learners will be asked.
7. Lack of motivation makes teachers reluctant to put in extra effort in adapting course books. According to Wright (2014), the best minds and people who genuinely care about helping others need to be attracted to teaching. Yet, some teachers think of teaching as an income generating activity rather than a profession that requires total commitment. Therefore, they only fill learners' heads with content rather than teach them to solve problems and to view the world from different perspectives.
8. The tight schedule and the demands of the Kenyan Education system stifle the teacher's creativity
9. When teachers choose to use technology as one way of adapting

course books, they are likely to face the following challenges:

- i. Lack of Electrical Power. Power is needed to run technological devices. Until electrical power is widely available, reliable, and affordable, adapting educational technology as a way of teaching and learning will not be realized.
- ii. Lack of internet Connectivity.
- iii. Training and Professional Development. Teachers who have been brought up in a world with limited technology find it difficult to use technology to engage and support learning. They therefore need to be trained and professionally prepared to use technology effectively in the classroom.
- iv. Sustainability. Technological programmers that improve the teaching and learning process should be supported and maintained. New instructional methods that cannot be sustained frustrate those who spent considerable time to learn them only to find that they can't maintain them.

Recommendations

1. Professional preparedness. Teachers should be informed through workshops and seminars, the importance of adapting course books for their classroom teaching since many do not understand the critical need for doing so.
2. Institutional support. The school administration should willingly work with the teachers by providing both moral and financial support to enable teachers adapt materials for their classroom teaching.
3. Use of technology. Schools should strive to invest in materials that facilitate the use of technology in the teaching/learning process, since this is the trend worldwide.
4. Teachers should be willing to invest in both time and effort so as to adapt materials that will add value to their teaching practices.
5. The curriculum should be designed to allow some flexibility so as teacher creativity is not limited.
6. Teachers should be well motivated in terms of remuneration so that that they teach without divided attention.

Conclusion

Teachers should not be averse to the use of course books, since most of them are great teaching tools. However, they should not solely rely on them to carry out their teaching practices. They should take total responsibility for the content of their classes and realize that good teaching is a balancing act between conformity and creativity.

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